DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 419 184 CG 028 420

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TITLE Culture Specific Knowledge and the Ability To Empathize: Applications for Cross-Cultural Counseling Training.

PUB DATE 1998-04-03

NOTE 15p.; Presented at the Great Lakes Regional Conference, Division 17 of the American Psychological Association (Bloomington, IN, April 3-4, 1998).

PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.

DESCRIPTORS *Black Culture; Blacks; *Counselor Attitudes; *Counselor Training; *Cultural Awareness; Cultural Pluralism; *Empathy; Graduate Students; Higher Education; Whites; Young Adults

IDENTIFIERS Black Intelligence Test of Cultural Homogeneity; Multicultural Counseling

ABSTRACT

The acquisition of culture-specific knowledge through reading and/or experience is an important component of cross-cultural counseling education. This study explores the relationship between counselor trainees' culture specific knowledge and their ability to empathize in general. It would seem reasonable to assume that those who belong to a different culture and who are aware of the cultural norms of a different culture would also tend to be more empathic and vice versa. Because of the long-standing tension between Black American and White society, Blacks were chosen for inclusion in this study. Given that the understanding of another's language is typically associated with some understanding and interest in another's culture, a measure that assesses knowledge of Black vocabulary was also selected to address the following research questions: Is there a significant difference in White trainees' scores on the Empathy Test between a group of students who scored high on the Black Intelligence Scale of Cultural Homogeneity and a group of students who scored low on that scale?"; and "Do White counselor trainees who are more familiar with Black culture have a greater ability to empathize in general than those who are less familiar with that culture?" Participants included 15 female and 7 male White graduate students. Findings indicate that counselor trainees who had greater culture specific knowledge of African Americans have no greater ability to empathize with others than those who had less knowledge. Implications for cross-cultural counseling training are presented and discussed. (MKA)

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Presented as Poster Presentation at the
1998 Great Lakes Regional Conference
Division 17 of the American Psychological Association
Bloomington, Indiana
April 3-4, 1998

Submitted for review for an ERIC Publication
April 6, 1998

ED 419 184

CG028420

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Culture Specific Knowledge and the Ability to Empathize: Implications for Cross-cultural Counseling Education

Abstract

Findings indicated that counselor trainees who had greater culture-specific knowledge of African Americans have no greater ability to empathize with others than those who had less. No significant relationship was found between the two variables. Implications for cross-cultural counseling training are presented and discussed.

Culture Specific Knowledge and the Ability to Empathize: Implications for Cross-cultural Counseling Education

The acquisition of culture-specific knowledge through reading and/or experience is a primary recommendation by proponents of cross-cultural counseling education (Casas, Ponterotto, & Guteirez, 1986; Pedersen, 1986; Todisco & Salamone, 1991). The composition of cross-cultural textbooks exclusively, if not primarily, present cultural norms of specific racial/ethnic minorities in the USA. Being familiar with such literature is sometimes perceived as having increased sensitivity and heightened effectiveness with all populations, even those not addressed in the text (Beckett, Dungee-Anderson, Cox, & Daly, 1997; Fitzgerald & Oleary, 1990). Some believe that extensive personal and/or professional contact with members of at least one racial/ethnic minority group alone enhances sensitivity and cross-cultural education/ experience/training are perceived as additive, (as opposed to substitutive)(Hannigan, 1990; Ridley, 1985; Westwood & Lawrence, 1990). Those who have greater culture-specific knowledge through reading or experience might be assumed to possess enhanced skills that typically distinguish the most effective counselors from those who are not as effective (Beckett, Dungee-Anderson, Cox, & Daly, 1997; Bentacourt, Hardin, & Manzi, 1992; Dahl, 1989; Klineberg, 1983; Pickett, 1995; Ponterotto, Casas, Suzuki, & Alexander, 1995; Rubin, Pusch, Fogarty, & McGinn, 1995l).

One such skill that has been found to distinguish between the most and the least effective counselors is the ability to empathize, to understand and anticipate the reactions of another (Ham, 1989; Ivey, 1989; Kerr & Speroff, 1951). Empathy is commonly known as the ability to walk in someone else's shoes: empathy means the overall acceptance of the clients' cultural self-image (Dahl, 1989; Zahn-Waxler, 1991). Furthermore, empathic understanding requires cognitive awareness, effective sensitivity, and a multidimensional perspective to facilitate creating a bridge between the therapist and the client (Ham, 1989; June, 1995).

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between counselor trainees' culture specific knowledge and the ability to empathize in general. It would seem reasonable to assume that those who belong to a different culture and who are aware of the cultural norms of a different culture would also tend to be more empathic and vice versa.

Because of the long-standing, public, tension that has existed between Black Americans and White society, the Black culture was chosen for inclusion of this study (Beckett, Dungee-Anderson Cox, & Daly, 1997; Jagers, 1997; Todisco & Salomone, 1997; Watkins, 1988; Wilson & Smith, 1991). Given that the understanding of another's language is typically associated with some understanding and interest in another's culture, a measure that assesses knowledge of the Black vocabulary was also selected to address the following research question: Is there a significant difference in White trainees' scores on The Empathy

Test (TET; Kerr & Speroff, 1951) between a group of students who scored high on the Black Intelligence Scale of Cultural Homogeneity (BITCH; Williams, 1972) and a group of students who scored low on the BITCH? Do White counselor-trainees who are more familiar with Black culture have greater ability to empathize in general than those who are less familiar?

The results should assist in a clearer understanding of what aspects of multicultural counseling training should be emphasized as well as offer some understanding of those trainees who do have varying degrees of knowledge about other cultures, in general, and the African American culture in particular.

Methods

Participants

The participants were 15 female and 7 male White, graduate students enrolled in a non-required, cross-cultural experiential/diadctic counseling course at a large Midwestern university. Seven of the students were doctoral level, while 15 were masters level students. All had completed 30 or more graduate credit hours in Counseling Psychology and had a GPA of 3.0 or above. The mean age was 29.6.

Measures

The Empathy Test (TET; Kerr & Speroff, 1951). The TET was designed to assess individuals' ability to engage in empathic thinking. Empathic thinking is defined in this case as the ability to understand and anticipate the reactions of others. The measure requests examinees to rank order values that are those of others: society in general and older persons. The

instrument consists of three items wherein examinees are requested to rank order items which reflect different aspects of subcultural norms in the USA. The items require that the examinee attempts to perceive different aspects of life from a predominantly Western cultural perspective and from the perspective of unique subcultures represented in the USA.

Higher scores are indicative of greater ability to predict another's perspective. Test-retest reliability coefficients range from .67 (108 college men) to 1.81 (60 Eastern college students). A split-half reliability coefficient of .89 on 124 male skilled workers.

Clinical fellows within the American Psychological Association were found to have a mean score of 87.7 (Siegel, 1954), and reliability coefficients range from .67 to .81. TET scores have been found to be significantly and positively related to: interpersonal desirability of college men (Moreno, 1954); the ability to be an effective supervisor; the participation in leadership roles in university student organizations; the ability to feel what others feel; efficiency in clinical prediction (Alden, 1954); and, the ability to be an effective salesperson (Kerr & Speroff, 1951). Therefore the test measures something which is independent of self-judgment.

The Black Intelligence Test of Cultural Homogeneity is not intended to be culture fair since items were chosen to discriminate between Blacks and whites, and it was designed primarily for the Black experience. It is a 100-item multiple choice instrument with item stems consisting of words, phrases,

and individuals unique to the Black American culture and history in the USA. Examinees are requested to identify the best response that describes the stem word to phrase. Testing time is approximately 30-45 minutes. Williams stated that the measure does pick up intellectual indicators not commonly found in conventional tests. There is a low correlation between subtests of the California Achievement Test and the measure which is interpreted as meaning that the BITCH and the CAT measure different phenomena. Test-retest reliability has been found to be .84 and higher. Young & Reared (1979) found that lower-class Black subjects had lower scores than middle-class Black subjects, and that females scored higher than males.

Procedure

Instruments were distributed to the participants during the first week of classes as part of a classroom experiential exercise to demonstrate the impact of culturally biased testing upon self-concept and group relations. Both instruments were given in a group setting. The instructor initially explained that results would be used to assess intelligence and competency of counselor-trainees as indicated by test scores. Students were instructed to take these tests seriously because scores would contribute to some part of the semester grade. The primary objective of the exercise was to provide a 'real' stimulus for discussing the impact of testing upon racial minorities. All students were aware of individual and group results and the test interpretation. Reactions to the experience and the specific instruments were discussed and processed in the classroom.

Data Analysis

T-tests were performed in order to examine the EAT score differences between high and low BITCH scorers. Pearson product correlations will be performed in order to examine the relationship between the two variables.

Results

The instruments were scored by a student staff member and checked by the instructor. The group of 22 was divided into 2 groups. The 11 who scored higher on the BITCH were identified as Group 1 and the 11 scoring lower were identified as Group 2. A t-test was computed to compare the mean scores for Group 1 (mean = 71) and group 2 (mean = 52). Group 1 and 2 mean scores were found to be significantly different ($t = 3.58$; $p = .001$) with respective standard deviations being 7.53 and 7.49.

A t-score was then computed to examine the differences between the two groups in terms of TET scores. The t score was found to be .62, indicating no significant ($p<.05$) difference on the TET scores. The Group 1 TET mean score was 53, while the Group 2 TET mean score was 57. Standard deviations were 20.71 and 16.85, respectively. No significant correlation was found between the two variables.

Discussion

These results indicate that there is diversity in the levels of culture specific knowledge of Black American culture among students enrolled in a cross-cultural counseling course; however, this knowledge did not translate into differential responses on the TET. These findings suggest that counselor-trainees'

knowledge of the particular cultural norms of another's group has no association with their general ability to put themselves in another's position. In addition, those students who may have the general ability to put themselves in another position, may not have actively or naturally acquired cultural knowledge beyond their own group.

The instructor's observations throughout the semester suggested the same; knowledge of the Black culture did not guarantee that counselor-trainees would be more empathic in their responses when role-playing and discussing cross-cultural counseling issues. In fact, some of the students who had the highest BITCH scores were sometimes the same students who were perceived by the instructor and role-playing clients as least empathic during classroom exercises. Culture-specific knowledge and the ability to empathize appear to be unrelated.

Another example during this classroom experience further supports the empirical findings. During the discussion of the exercise, many students expressed anger and frustration about their grades being effected by some instruments with which they were unfamiliar. Some questioned the instructors' right to do so. Although the reactions from high scorers dissipated after results were shared, very few of the students in class nor in written logs connected these experiences with that of many minority students. in this country. Even though the consequence of GRE scores had much graver consequences for them, all students, though some hesitantly, had taken the GRE without question or challenge, but were angered when a African American

professor set the priorities. The ability to place themselves in anothers' position (empathy) was minimal, even among those with high culture specific knowledge. These blind spots were carefully examined during the course of the semester.

Results from this study support the idea that more than knowledge about other cultures is needed. Although many of the current training programs have responded to the call for multicultural counseling by adding one didactic course to an already established curriculum, these results indicate that this is not enough to prepare professionals adequately. Though reading about and discussing other cultures may be necessary, it appears that it is not sufficient and does not relay a message about the degree to which the reader is able to step into the shoes of 'the other'. These findings suggest that there are other motivations for reading and learning about another culture that are not addressed within this design. Future studies might select this focus as an objective.

Readers must be aware of the limitations of these results. First, the small sample size and the regional restriction to only one campus and one course could limit the generalizability of these findings to other student populations.

Second, some students believed that a few times on the BITCH had become a part of the mainstream vocabulary through media. In this study this instrument might have partially measured age of the participant, television watching practices, and/or socioeconomic level of families of origin more than familiarity with Black culture. These factors were not taken into

consideration, but should be noted in future research using this measure. The use of an instrument with more current vocabulary and issues might have produced different results.

Third, the TET measures the ability to empathize in general which could be very different from the empathy that is involved in the counseling process when counseling the culturally different. An instrument that specifically measures the ability to empathize during the counseling session might have been more useful for what was to be addressed in this study.

However, in spite of these stated limitations, findings do raise some important questions about the training of more culturally sensitive professionals. It appears that we must give up the assumption that those who 'know' about specific cultural norms' may only indicate that they 'know' and nothing else. Future empirical research is warranted.

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